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Author: Kaveh Abbasian

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Kaveh Abbasian*

The Role of Modern Audio-Visual Media in the Construction of Iranian National Identity

Abstract: This paper sheds light on a less explored aspect of the modern construction of Iranian national identity. It investigates the role of modern audio-visual media including cinema, radio and television in this modern construction. Although the study of Iranian national identity has developed well beyond the orthodox romantic nationalist approach dominant during the 20th century, not enough attention has been given to the study of modern audio-visual media. While the printing press had an important role in the construction of what Benedict Anderson calls an ‘imagined community’ of Iranians, it was the emergence of cinema, radio and television that crucially contributed to the spread of the Persian language as the national language of Iranians. I also argue that these media were essential in the propagation of the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavi dynasty. Another widely overlooked area in Iranian media studies is the importance of the 1979 Revolution in further popularization of audio-visual media. I investigate recently published data from research conducted in 1974 in order to show that despite the availability of these media, many Iranians refrained from using them, mainly due to religious reasons. The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Islamization of the audio-visual media, however, changed this dynamic and accelerated the popularization of these media even among the hardliner religious population. This contributed to further construction of an Iranian national identity.

Keywords: Iranian national identity; nationalism; audio-visual media; cinema; radio; television; Pahlavi dynasty; the Islamic Republic; the Iranian Revolution; 20th century

* Kaveh Abbasian studied film at the Tehran University of Art and the Roehampton University of London where he completed his PhD project in Film and Television Studies in 2019. He currently works as an associate lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London and as a visiting lecturer at the Roehampton University of London. His research interests include Iranian nationalism and national identity, propaganda cinema, and guerrilla filmmaking. He is currently working on Iranian sacred defense filmmaking.

Introduction

In this paper, I intend to trace the modern construction of Iranian national identity from the perspective of media studies and more specifically film and television studies. I explore the role of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television, in the construction of Iranian national identity. In doing so, I have divided the paper into two main parts consisting of three sub-sections. The first main part deals with ongoing academic discussions in the fields of media studies and the construction of national identity in Iran. In the second, analytical part, I present a recently published study about media consumption in late Pahlavi Iran from whose findings I draw my conclusion.

In the first sub-section, following Benedict Anderson's theory of nations as 'imagined communities'¹ I discuss the rise of the printing press in Iran and its role in the spread of the Persian language in late 19th and early 20th century. I argue that although important in creating the idea of Iran, Persian publications remained unreadable for the illiterate majority of the population. A full review of national identity studies of Iran is beyond the scope of the paper, however, in the context of Anderson's work, there are other media crucial to the development of identity which have not been considered enough. I extend Anderson's theory in order to discuss the emergence of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television in the 20th century as a major catalyst in the construction of Iranian national identity. During the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), cinema, radio and television proved critical in the dissemination of the Persian language as the national language as well as propagation of the nationalist ideology of the newly emerging nation-state. I discuss the specific role of each of these three media (cinema, radio, television) and offer a brief case study of the first Iranian sound film, *The Lur Girl* (1934), which included an authoritarian nationalist message.

In the second section I reflect on different arguments concerning the question of Iranian national identity. A comprehensive review of identity studies and nationalism in Iran is beyond the scope of this study; however, I reflect on some of the notable developments in order to pinpoint the specific area in the academic study of Iranian national identity on which I put the focus of my argument and also in order to make clear the lines of thought and methodologies that have influenced my own study. I discuss Anderson's theory² and accordingly, the modernization approach in the study of Iranian national identity. I

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006).

² Ibid.

contend that the investigation of modern audio-visual media and their role in the construction of Iranian national identity remains a lacuna in the field.

In the second part (my third section), I focus on recently published research conducted by ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān in 1974.³ Using detailed statistics, I provide an analysis of the popularity and the reach of these media in Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty up to the 1979 Revolution. I show that due to several obstacles, including religious opposition, these media did not reach the peak of their popularization until after the 1979 Revolution. Contrary to popular belief, I suggest the revolution and the subsequent Islamization of these media resulted in their further popularization, making them essential tools in the construction of Iranian national identity.

While taking into account the political ideology of both the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic Republic, I have tried to take the argument beyond mere rhetoric and focus on a continuous process of the construction of Iranian national identity and the crucial role of the audio-visual media during both periods.

Part 1: Public Media and the Nation-State

In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson argues that the modern emergence of the nation as an idea is associated with the invention of the printing press and rise of print capitalism.⁴ He argues that in order to maximize profit, capitalist entrepreneurs preferred to publish books in vernacular languages (instead of exclusive languages such as Latin). When people who spoke various dialects of that language became able to read the same books and papers which were previously published in limited numbers, a sense of unity was created inside groups of people who didn’t necessarily know each other. This opportunity was used by elites in order to produce the feeling among the readers that they shared a set of interests. This feeling was then used towards the creation of a sense of nationalism that gave birth to the nation state. Through this analysis, Anderson refers to the nation as an “imagined community” which in his words is deeply rooted in “religious communities” and “dynastic realms”.⁵ This understanding of the nation is particularly significant for the study of Iranian national identity for the importance that it gives to modern media and their role in spreading vernacular

³ ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud: nigarishhā-yi ijtimā’ī-farhangī va tūsi’ih-yi nāmūtivāzin dar Īrān* (A Voice That Was Not Heard: Socio-Cultural Attitudes and Uneven Development in Iran) (Tehran: Nashrini, 2017).

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

languages towards the construction of nations and also for the link that it establishes between the nation and its political power.

In Iran, publishing houses and publications such as books, newspaper, and magazines first emerged during the 19th century under the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925) and continued to flourish into the 20th century. Although these publications were fundamental in the formation of the idea of Iran as a nation-state, they remained unreadable to the illiterate masses. This dynamic changed in the 20th century with the introduction of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television. These media were capable of communicating with a much larger section of the population regardless of their level of literacy and thus, played a significant role in propagation of the Persian language as a unifying factor in the construction of Iranian national identity. The emergence of cinema, in particular, coincided with Rīzā Shāh's nation-state building program (1921 and 1941).

As pointed out by Afshin Marashi, the Rīzā Shāh period was the first political era in Iranian history in which the state self-consciously used nationalism as its ideology.⁶ Rīzā Shāh's implementation of authoritarian nationalist politics in Iran involved military force and heavy oppression of the opposition but also included other means of propagation of his nationalist ideology. In addition to print publications, he also recognized at an early stage the great potential of the new medium of cinema. His son, Muḥammad Rīzā Shāh, added radio and television to the list of media utilized in this ideological campaign. Cinema, radio and television all became crucial in maintaining the hegemony of the state. Modern audio-visual media, not only important in creating a sense of shared identity through Persian language, also served as essential tools for propagating the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavis.⁷

Cinema

Cinema appeared in Iran first in 1900. That year the French Catholic mission opened the first public cinema, Soleil Cinema, in Tabriz. The first commercial cinema in Iran opened its door to the public in 1904 in Chirāgh-Gāz Avenue in Tehran, showing trick films, comedies, and newsreels from the Transvaal War in South Africa.⁸ Its founder, Mīrzā Ibrāhīm Khān Ṣāḥāfbāshī, was a modern educated constitutionalist who, after travelling the world, returned to Iran with a

⁶ Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

⁷ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

⁸ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 57.

film projector. His early endeavor to establish a movie theater in Tehran, however, was foiled. Only a month after opening his cinema, Şahāfbāshī was forced to shut it down due to religious outrage.⁹ The main argument of the clergy and traditionalists who opposed the introduction of this new medium was that it was morally corrupt (and corrupting) and against Islamic doctrine, which objected to figurative representations.¹⁰ Despite the religious opposition, cinema was not going to go away; after all, the modernists saw cinema as an interesting modern means of communication. Several film theaters sprung up during the turbulent years of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the years after. Another well-travelled modernist pioneer of cinema was the Iranian Armenian Ārdāshis Bādmāgryān (1863–1928), known as Ardashīr Khān. After opening a cinema in his own apartment in Tehran in 1909, Ardashīr Khān set out to open an actual film theater in 1915. He named his eighty-seat public cinema *Tajaddud* meaning modernity.¹¹ This modernist fascination with cinema eventually found its way into Rīzā Shāh's authoritarian modernization project. Inheriting a society with an illiteracy rate of over 80 percent,¹² Rīzā Shāh understood cinema as a means of mass communication. Under his rule, new theaters were opened across Iran in order to show foreign films. These films typically opened with scenes of Rīzā Shāh's modernization campaign, showing the inauguration of the telegraph and railway industries, the construction of new bridges, roads and highways, and military marches. These images were accompanied by the national anthem while the audience was expected to stand to attention.¹³

By 1930 there were up to thirty-three film theaters across Iran and this number continued to grow. In that year Uvānis Uhānyān (1896–1960) established the first film school under the title of *Parvarishgāh-i Ārtistī-yi Sīnamā* (The Artistic Film School) and released the first Iranian film, a silent comedy named *Ābī ū Rabī* (Abi and Rabi).

The most iconic example of Rīzā Shāh's incorporation of cinema in his nation-state building campaign is *Dukhtar-i Lur* (The Lur Girl), the first Iranian talkie which was released in 1934. The film was produced in Persian in Bombay, India under the Imperial Film Company, where making a sound film was possible. The idea for the film was initiated by 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Sipantā (1907–1969), a pro-Rīzā Shāh modernist and nationalist Iranian who wrote the script

⁹ Naficy, *A Social History*.

¹⁰ Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 41.

¹¹ Naficy, *A Social History*, 67.

¹² Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

and turned it into a film with the aid of Ardashīr Īrānī (1886–1969), an Indian Parsi. *Dukhtar-i Lur* is an outright propagator of Rīzā Shāh's authoritarian campaign of nation-state building. The ideological approach of the film is evident even in its alternative title *Iran: Yesterday, Today*, which appeared on the posters. The story of the film takes place mainly in the Lur inhabited part of Southwest Iran. The Lurs in this area had shown fierce resistance against Rīzā Shāh's national unification campaign. Tribal and nomadic forces had fought bloody battles against Rīzā Shāh's military which eventually led to their defeat and subjugation and the consolidation of centralized power.¹⁴

The film begins with an explanatory text on the screen: "Before the auspicious era of Pahlavi, when South and West of Iran were under the influence of various tribal and nomadic forces (*īlāt va 'ashāyir-i mukhtalif*)". The first sequence of the film is dedicated to introducing Gulnār who was kidnapped as a child by bandits and was taken to Luristan where she was held in a teahouse as an entertainer. Ja'far (played by Sipantā himself) is a government agent who is sent to the Lur inhabited part of the country to deal with the problem of bandits. He is fully clothed in Western dress and has an air of power and wisdom unlike the people around Gulnār, who are depicted as backward savages. The two characters meet and fall in love. Ja'far helps Gulnār escape her captors. After a series of clashes and after Ja'far kills several bandits including their leader, they manage to flee. Fearing the revenge of the bandits, they escape to Mumbai.

After their arrival in Mumbai, the film is interrupted by a series of intertitles. The intertitles inform the audience that years passed, Rīzā Shāh seized power, and happiness overtook Iran. Then, on a background of the national flag, the new government's 'achievements' are noted one after another: 'Economic development', 'construction of factories', 'unified dress code', 'protection of women's rights', etc. The screen is then filled with three lines of text reading: "All of this progress has taken place just in a few years and as a result of considerations of the great *Shāhanshāh* (King of Kings) of Iran" which then cuts to another three lines: "This progress not only created comfort inside Iran but was also a cause for pride for all Iranians abroad". In his 2006 book, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, Hamid Reza Sadr claims that these intertitles were suggested by the state "to make clear that the lawlessness it depicted took place during the reign of the previous dynasty".¹⁵ The last sequence of the film shows the now unveiled and 'modernized' Gulnār playing piano under a framed picture of Rīzā Shāh on the wall while Ja'far sings a Nationalist pro-Pahlavi song. In the end, during a dialogue between Ja'far and Gulnār, Ja'far declares that the

¹⁴ Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921–1941* (London: Routledge, 2007), 26.

¹⁵ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 32.

“fatherland” is now “blessed” and is full of “happiness” and that they should go back to Iran. The film concludes with an image of Rīzā Shāh.

As Sadr argues, *Dukhtar-i Lur* has a colonial adventurer narrative with an Orientalist approach.¹⁶ This is evident in the role of Ja‘far as the Westernized male savior of the female victim trapped in a backward society. After rescuing his ‘damsel in distress’, the hero introduces her to Western culture and ‘modernity’, presumably as a metaphor for what Rīzā Shāh did to Iran. The similarity between Ja‘far’s outfit and that of Rīzā Shāh is not a coincidence. Like Ja‘far, Rīzā Shāh also set out to ‘save’ Iran from ‘backwardness’ and ‘savagery’ and in order to do so he did not hesitate to kill his enemies. The savages in the film were in reality tribal and nomadic Lurs who resisted Rīzā Shāh’s national unification and forced sedentarization campaign. In case their military defeat was not enough for their complete subjugation, they were now demonized in the first Iranian sound film. So, Iranians who for the first time went to cinemas to watch an Iranian sound film, were subjected to a fictionalized version of their government’s authoritarian national identity building project. It is worth noting that as a result of making the film in India and using Indian actors, most of the characters when speaking Persian had Indian accents. Also, the character of Gulnār who was introduced in the film as a Lur was played by Rūḥangīz Samī‘nīzhād (1916–1997) who was from Bam in Kerman province and had Kermani accent. Ja‘far however (who was played by Sipantā himself), spoke Persian with a Tehrani accent. So, while introducing the Persian language as the language of the nation, the film also introduced a specific accent of that language as the accent of power, wisdom, and progress. The Lur people weren’t only demonized in appearance and deeds but were also stripped of their Luri language and were made to speak Persian in non-native accents in the film.

The importance of cinema for Rīzā Shāh’s administration is also clear in its approach towards another film with Lur tribes at its center. However, where *Dukhtar-i Lur* was favored by the central administration, the other was very much disliked and banned: a documentary film titled *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (1925). The filmmakers, Merian C. Cooper (1893–1973) and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1893–1979), were the same duo who went on to produce *King Kong* in 1933. The colonial adventurer eye that led to the making of *King Kong* is very much present also in *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life*. The film follows a branch of the Bakhtiari tribe of Lurs as they and their herds make their seasonal migration. They endure such hardships as crossing the Karun River and trekking the Zard-Kuh, the highest peak (4,221 m) in the Zagros Mountains. The filmmakers depict their own journey from Angora (modern day Ankara, Turkey) to the land of the Bakhtiaris as a journey through history; a journey to

¹⁶ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 29.

find what they call 'the forgotten people'. The film then depicts these 'forgotten' people's culture as a primitive way of life, preserved in time in a primitive Eastern part of the world. This of course did not sit well with Rīzā Shāh's modernization campaign and the image he tried to present of Iran and Iranians. As a result of this conflict, the film was banned from Iranian cinemas. It was only after Rīzā Shāh's abdication and during his son's reign, in 1964, that *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* was finally shown in Iran, albeit with additional commentary added in order to alleviate its negative impact.¹⁷

Theoretically speaking cinema was accessible for people regardless of their level of literacy, and thus could communicate with a larger portion of the population. In practice, however, there existed several obstacles. A lack of infrastructure was one significant obstacle but also the fact that the clergy and traditionalists remained critical of the new medium limited its proliferation. Nacim Pak-Shiraz argues that their criticism wasn't only due to the 'corrupt' Western content of the films being shown but also because by "creating a space for mixed-sex entertainment, cinema also created a dangerous new 'unislamic' leisure ritual".¹⁸ This is particularly important because many religious rituals had been suppressed under Rīzā Shāh and cinema seemed to offer an alternative.

Despite this conflicting relationship, the popularity of cinema gradually grew, making it an important source of communication. Rapid industrialization and the adoption of capitalist modes of production resulted in the establishment of increasingly more cinema venues, film production companies and also a boost in the urban population.¹⁹ The first volume of Jamāl Umīd's book *Farhang-i filmhā-yi sinimā-yi Īrān* (Encyclopaedia of Iranian Films)²⁰ provides us with detailed information regarding films made in the early years of Iranian cinema. A close examination reveals that in regard to Persian-language film production, between 1930 and 1936 a rate of at least one film per year was made, but by 1953 more than ten films per year were being produced, and this number continued to grow. This did not even include the foreign films which were dubbed in Persian and widely distributed as well.

The Allied Forces' occupation of Iran in 1941 which had led to the abdication of Rīzā Shāh, had also allowed for a development of a lively free press. The number of newspapers, magazines, and other publications continued to grow during and after the war. This growing number of publications, together with

¹⁷ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 20.

¹⁸ Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 41.

¹⁹ Naficy, *A Social History*, 10.

²⁰ Jamāl Umīd, *Farhang-i filmhā-yi sinimā-yi Īrān* (Encyclopaedia of Iranian Films). Vol. 1. 4 vols. (Tehran: Nigāh, 2010).

cinema in the form of both dubbed foreign films and Iranian films, played a significant role in the spread of the Persian language as a unifying force. In this way, the emergence of what Anderson calls 'Print Capitalism' along with the rise of cinema as a capitalist endeavor with state guidance supported the construction of the 'imagined community'²¹ of 'Iranians'. However, it must be noted that even in the early 1950s when some of the daily political publications had a circulation of 50,000, the majority of the population remained outside their sphere of influence due to the high illiteracy rate of 80 percent.²² While dissemination of these ideas could have also occurred through word of mouth, with such a high illiteracy rate, it must be questioned how influential these publications really were throughout Iran. Moreover, as discussed previously, a significant portion of society refused to go to cinemas due to their religious beliefs. Therefore, the introduction of radio with its greater accessibility to all came to be an important medium in the construction of Iranian national identity.

Radio

Emergence of radio in Iran is linked to Nazi Germany's special interest in the country and their attempts to spread Aryan national ideology among Iranians. The Aryan national ideology which became an important component of the Pahlavis' nation-state building project had found its way into Iranian political debates among the elites and intellectuals in the late 19th century; however, a significant event that helped boost this ideology amongst a broader number of Iranians was Nazi Germany's interest in Iran and especially their presence in the country during Riżā Shāh's reign. Matthias Küntzel discusses the special relationship between Iran and Germany and the role of the Nazi movement in the development of Aryan ideology among the larger Iranian public.²³ He presents evidence that since the late 19th century and especially after the rise to the throne of Wilhelm II (1859–1941) in 1888, the Germans had shown a special interest in the Islamic world. This was due to their competition with other European powers, whose influence in the East they wished to restrain. Küntzel argues that this special interest and attempt to develop a relationship

²¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²² Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 55.

²³ Matthias Küntzel, *Ālmānī-hā va Īrān: Tārīkh-i guzashtih va mu'āsir-i yik dūsti-yi badfarjām* (The Germans and Iran: History and Present of a Fateful Friendship), trans. Michael Mobasheri (Paris and Cologne: Editions Khavaran and Forough Publishing, 2017), <https://rangin-kaman.net/wp-content/uploads/images/post/ald.pdf>.

entered a new phase during the rule of the Nazi Party.²⁴ Unlike Britain and Russia, Germany was not involved in colonial and imperial politics in Iran and thus didn't have that negative implication of a foreign invasive power for Iranians. Moreover, Nazi Germany played a crucial role in the industrialization of Iran during Rīzā Shāh's regime. This all helped to establish a friendly image of Germany for Iranians.

When it came to making an ally in the East, the Nazi propaganda machine led by Joseph Goebbels made good use of the Aryan ideology. One important channel through which they publicized this ideology was the Persian-language Radio Berlin broadcasts that started in 1938; the first Persian radio to be heard by Iranians was dedicated to an Aryan ideology that declared Iranians to be of the same race as their German 'brothers'.²⁵

Küntzel draws upon reports from the German ambassador that suggests during World War II Germans were favored by many Iranians, including the clergy. This support for Germany was extended to many Shi'a clerics claiming that Hitler was a descendent of the prophet Muḥammad; some even declared that Hitler was in fact the Hidden Imam (the Twelfth Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī) of the Shi'as who had finally emerged to revive Islam.²⁶ In their radio program, the Nazis accompanied their analysis with verses from the Quran. For instance, in order to advocate their anti-Jewish policies, they used Quranic verses in regard to Muḥammad's campaigns against the Jewish tribes who lived in Arabia.²⁷

The Allied Forces' occupation of Iran in 1941 and the subsequent abdication of Rīzā Shāh put an end to the special relationship between Iran and Germany; however, the influence of the Nazi ideological campaign was to last for decades to come. A true son of his father, the new monarch, Muḥammad Rīzā Shāh continued the campaign of national identity building. His ideological approach is signified by the fact that after the Second World War he appointed Bahrām Shāhrukh (presenter and head of Radio Berlin in Persian) to the post of director of news and propaganda.²⁸

The state-controlled Radio Iran was inaugurated on April 24th, 1940, two years after Radio Berlin started its Persian broadcasts. The date was symbolically chosen as it was the crown prince's twenty first birthday. The first broadcast which lasted for four hours from 7pm to 11pm, started with the Iranian

²⁴ Küntzel, *Ālmānī-hā va Īrān*, 34.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁸ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 160.

national anthem. After the crown prince enacted the necessary formalities, the prime minister, Aḥmad Matīn-Daftarī (1897–1971) read a short message outlining the benefits of radio for the general public and that listening centers would be set up where people could listen to radio for free.²⁹ The press took notice of this historic event: The newspaper *Iṭṭilāʿāt* published a piece describing radio as “one of the most important human inventions [...] among the most valuable gifts of civilization and progress” that could be considered “the voice of a nation heard in different parts of the world [...] and can be used as an element in strengthening the unity of a nation”.³⁰ In an interview published in his semi-autobiography, *Umīd va āzādī* (Hope and Freedom), Īraj Gurgīn, a prominent producer, reporter, and news anchor for Radio Iran stated:

From its foundation until many years later, radio in Iran was considered a section of the General Bureau of Propaganda and Publication, and a state broadcasting institute whose task was propaganda, not necessarily according to journalistic etiquettes.³¹

This policy continued under the second Pahlavi ruler. The anchor was instructed to start every program with the latest news on the “*Shāhanshāh Āryāmīhr*” (King of Kings, Light of the Aryans).³²

On December 29th, 1940, eight months after the first broadcast of Radio Iran, BBC Radio also started Persian-language broadcasts, and in the 1960s Radio Tehran was added to the state-controlled radio, with more entertainment programs gradually being included in their broadcasts.³³ Compared to cinema and the press, radio managed to penetrate deeper into the public and to engage a larger part of the population. According to a UNESCO report, by 1940 20,000 radio sets existed in Iran; a decade later this number rose to 60,000, roughly one set per 300 people.³⁴

Television

The 1953 coup was followed by years of political oppression and economic growth. With the resumption of oil revenues, government money started to flow again, and an atmosphere of entrepreneurship and capitalist competition

²⁹ Īraj Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī* (Hope and Freedom) (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2012).

³⁰ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 53.

³¹ Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī*, 28.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 53.

took over.³⁵ Among these entrepreneurs was Ḥabībullāh Ṣābit, who acquired state permission to establish the first television station in Iran. As a result, while radio in Iran started as a state-controlled means of ideological dominance, television (at least at its beginning) took a different route and was founded as a private business. As well as establishing the television station, Ṣābit imported and sold television receivers, while also selling advertisement airtime to local entrepreneurs. The *Television of Iran* was inaugurated in October 1958 with a speech by Mohammad Riżā Shāh.³⁶

Following the success of Ṣābit's *Television of Iran*, the government set out to establish its own state-run television station. On October 26th 1966, National Iranian Television sent out its first broadcast, a message from Muḥammad Riżā Shāh. Complete programs started on Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, in March 1967. In July 1969, Ṣābit's *Television of Iran* was taken over by the state, after which television became a state-run organization. In 1971 National Iranian Television was merged with the thirty-five-year-old radio network and National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) was born as a public broadcast monopoly operating as an independent government corporation.³⁷

Comparatively, television broadcasts reached a considerably smaller part of the population than those of radio (mainly the emerging middle and upper class), but it did continue to grow. By 1979, NIRT had about 9,000 employees. NIRT was heavily incorporated in the state's political campaigns, so much that according to Gurgīn:

In regard to what was called matters of national security, especially after the emergence of urban guerrilla movement and a rise of armed clashes, and also in the critical period prior to the revolution, NIRT didn't have anything to say; it was information and security authorities of the country that were the references and provided the content of reports in regard to these matters.³⁸

Moreover, due to its visual qualities, television was considered a significant medium in propagation of the Pahlavi's national ideology. It was through this new medium that in October 1971 the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire was broadcasted live for both national and international audiences. Monarchs and heads of state were invited from around the world to take part in a lavish party organized to strengthen Muḥammad Riżā Shāh's position both in

³⁵ Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926–1979* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1981).

³⁶ Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 62.

³⁷ See Hossein Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession* (London: Routledge, 2007), 95.

³⁸ Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī*, 44.

Iran and also on the world stage, and to introduce him as a true heir to a supposedly continuous Persian monarchy founded by Cyrus II (also known as Cyrus the Great). The world, and more significantly Iranians, watched the Shah on the first day of the celebrations when he stood in front of the tomb of Cyrus and called him “the immortal hero of the history of Iran”, before pledging allegiance to him: “Cyrus! [...] Sleep in peace, for we are awake! And we always will be”.³⁹

The people of the Shah’s ‘nation’, however, were not allowed anywhere near the celebration, which was reserved for the domestic elite, foreign monarchs and heads of state. Instead, they were to hear about it only on the radio or television.

Iranian National Identity: A Contested Idea

A comprehensive discussion on all aspects of the study of Iranian national identity is beyond the scope of this paper; however, by briefly reviewing some of the main trends as well as influential scholarly arguments, I aim to make it clear as to where and how my own approach fits into this study. The academic study of Iranian national identity in the field of Iranian studies was until recently dominated by an arguably primordialist, romantic and nationalist approach. For instance, in his 1982 book, *Huvīyat-i Īrānī va zabān-i Fārsī* (Iranian Identity and the Persian Language), Shāhrukh Miskūb claims that “of course, in previous ages also, we were a nation with our own specific identity, and had an idea of Iran and Iranian”.⁴⁰ Even as late as 1993, such claims were being made by leading scholars of Iranian studies such as Ehsan Yarshater, who declared that “Iranian identity is clearly asserted in the inscriptions of Darius the Great (522–486 BC), who as an Aryan and a Persian was fully conscious of his racial affiliation and proud of his national identity”.⁴¹

In this classic or orthodox approach, the ‘nation of Iran’ and ‘Iranian identity’ are considered natural, homogenous, and continuous elements in history. Persian ethnicity is at the core of this notion of Iranian identity and the Persian language is recognized as the carrier and savior of this identity even through such challenges as the Arab invasion that ended the Sassanian Empire in 651. There is also a special emphasis put on the ‘Aryan’ racial aspect of Iranian identity. Furthermore, Zoroastrianism is considered to have had been the original national religion of Iranians and Persians, before the foreign imposition of Islam

³⁹ Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 204–05.

⁴⁰ Shāhrukh Miskūb, *Huvīyat-i Īrānī va zabān-i Fārsī* (Iranian Identity and the Persian Language) (Tehran: Farzān, 2006), 17.

⁴¹ Ehsan Yarshater, “Persian Identity in Historical Perspective,” *Iranian Studies* 26, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1993): 141–42.

by the invading Arabs. It is also argued that Persians modified Islam to make it fit their own identity.⁴²

The most radical opposition to the orthodox primordialist approach came in 1993 with the publication of Mostafa Vaziri's book *Iran as Imagined Nation*.⁴³ Only three years after Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Vaziri took a similar approach in his analysis with regard to the construction of 'the nation of Iran' and Iranian national identity. He aimed to challenge what he summarized as "the dominant nationalist historiography which had anachronistically conceptualized and traced Iranian national identity to the remote past".⁴⁴

By taking a 'modernization approach', Vaziri considered 'Iran' and 'Iranian identity' modern constructs. The core idea of his book was the importance he gave to the works of 19th century European Orientalists, who studied the 'Orient' and as he claimed, came up with the ideas of 'Iran' and 'Iranians' as a country and its people. He argued that the beginning of this formal study of Iran can be tied to two events at the end of the 18th century: first, the discovery of the Indo-European language family and subsequently the idea of the 'Aryan people'; and second, the competition between the two imperial powers of France and England over parts of Asia. While England controlled much of what is today India, Napoleon I became interested in both India and the region to its west: Iran.⁴⁵ Vaziri argued that in studying the people of this region, both past and present, the Orientalists used a nationalist methodology to categorize diverse populations. This methodology, he believed "may have been inevitable and even, to a certain degree, natural after Europe had gone through the historical experiences that led to the formation of national identities in a narrow context".⁴⁶ By taking this methodology and under the influence of the Aryan model, they applied such modern concepts as race and national identity to communities of the remote past whose perceptions were conditioned by non-modern ideas. The eventual result of such an approach, as Vaziri points out, was the Orientalist belief in "homogeneity and the Iranianness of communities

⁴² See Jalāl Khāliqī-Mutlaq and Jalāl Matīnī, "Īrān dar guzasht-i rūzgārān" (Iran through the Passing of Time), *Iranshenasi* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 233–68; Yarshater, "Persian Identity"; Jalīl Dūstkhvāh, "Huviyat-i Īrānī: Vahm yā vāq'iyat" (Iranian Identity: Illusion or Reality), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 509–20; Miskūb, *Huviyat-i Īrānī*; Muḥammad Ja'far Maḥjūb, "Guftār darbārih-yi ba'zī mustafrangān va farangān" (Essay on Some Wannabe Westerns and Westerners), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 673–714; 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīn-kūb, *Dū qarn sukūt* (Two Centuries of Silence) (Tehran: Sukhan, 1999).

⁴³ Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁵ Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 97.

who lived in the land of Iran in different historical periods".⁴⁷ Vaziri then argued that this approach was followed by the Iranian nationalist thinkers of the late 19th century onwards, who worked towards modernizing, democratizing and secularizing the country they were helping to create.⁴⁸

There were also other scholars who, to varying degrees, challenged the orthodox view on Iranian identity. Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, although critical of Vaziri's book, also took a revisionist viewpoint. He claimed that Vaziri's approach in considering the national historiography a "product of European colonialism" to be an 'Orientalist' approach itself.⁴⁹ Tavakoli-Targhi instead emphasized the role of late 19th century Iranian intellectuals themselves. He argued that the crafting of a modern Iranian identity was linked to the efforts of these intellectuals towards the configuration of history and a re-styling of language. He showed how certain terms such as *kishvar*, *millat* and *Īrān*, which already existed in Persian, were "rearticulated" in their texts in order to express new modern meanings of 'country', 'nation' and 'Iran' (in its modern national sense). For instance, he presented evidence on the evolution of the term *vaṭan* (homeland) from referring to one's village or town to signifying 'motherland' in a national sense. He argued that in these texts the history of Iran replaced the history of Islam, and that the forgotten pre-Islamic past was described as a utopia. In this reconfigured history, Islam and the Arabs were blamed for Iran's backwardness and in order to regain the glory of the past, these historians looked to the 'cultured west'; to the culture that they believed was originally Iranian.⁵⁰

In his recently published book *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and The Politics of Dislocation*,⁵¹ while acknowledging the significance of both Vaziri and Tavakoli-Targhi's studies, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi presents his alternative argument starting with a critique of the two scholars:

Where Vaziri attributes the conceptual framework and narratives of Iranian nationalism to European orientalist alone, Tavakoli-Targhi keeps them squarely within the Persianate domain, seeing the origin of many nationalist myths in local sources

⁴⁷ Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Tārīkh-pardāzī va Īrān-ārayī: Bāzāsāzi-yi huviyat-i Īrānī dar guzārish-i tārikh" (Crafting History and Fashioning Iran: The Reconstruction of Iranian Identity in Modernist Historical Narratives), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 583–628.

⁵⁰ Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Historiography and Crafting Iranian National Identity," in *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture*, ed. Atabaki Touraj (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 5–21.

⁵¹ Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*.

exclusively. Vaziri rejects the agency of Iranians themselves (beyond their mere 'imitation') while Tavakoli-Targhi refutes any claim that European models could have been used to reimagine the Iranian nation.⁵²

Zia-Ebrahimi presents evidence on the claim that specific nationalist ideas that emerged in late 19th century Iran, were first expressed by European authors rather than in any local tradition. However, he argues that it was Iranian thinkers who "hybridized" these ideas into the Iranian nationalist ideology. He conducts detailed research to show the complexity of the process through which particular ideas were selected at the expense of others.⁵³

The above-mentioned scholars presented a new outlook into the study of Iranian national identity. But they remained preoccupied with Persian publications of the late 19th century in order to show how the idea of Iran and Iranian identity was crafted in the works of Iranian and non-Iranian intellectuals of that period. Like Anderson, they place much importance on the emergence of the printing press and publishing houses, but they rarely consider the larger implications of this new medium for the propagation of the Persian language. Instead, they mostly focus on the content of those publications. Accordingly, they rarely investigate the specific role of modern audio-visual media in the propagation of the Persian language as well as the concept of Iran as a nation amongst everyday people.

Part 2: 1979 – A Revolution in Media

I have built my argument in this paper on the basis of other scholars in the field who took a modernization approach towards the much-debated topic of Iranian national identity. However, I have tried to further their arguments by incorporating modern audio-visual media. The 1979 Revolution presents a significant moment in the modern construction of Iranian national identity.

A recently published study conducted by Asadī and Tehrānīyān in 1974 provides us with detailed statistical data on the use of public media and cultural habits in pre-revolution Iran.⁵⁴ Before proceeding to discuss the findings of this research, it is important to reflect on its history and validity of its methods. Although the research was conducted in 1974, it took more than 40 years for it to be publicly accessible in the form of a book. In their foreword for the book,

⁵² Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 13.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki šinīdih nashud*.

‘Abbās ‘Abdī and Muḥsin Gūdarzī, who are responsible for its recent publication, discuss the background of the research. They mention the unprecedented rise in the oil price during the 1970s which, in their words, resulted in the “illusion that Iran was about to become a world power”.⁵⁵ This was accompanied by a rapid increase in the use of radio and television and a general change in the economic structure and social behavior of Iranians. In such a setting a group of sociologists and communication specialists got together and decided to conduct a series of social forecasting studies (*muṭālī‘ātī āyandih nigarī*). According to their foreword, ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān were the main members of this group. Financial backing of the research was secured via the NIRT as one of the main aims of the research was to study how radio and television could help in the “development process of the country”.⁵⁶

The findings of the research were presented and discussed at a conference in Shiraz in 1975. However, they were not made available for the public. ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī argue that this was perhaps because the findings of the research did not fit the image that the authorities had of themselves and the vision they had for the society. The findings showed that despite the rapid industrialization and expansion of the middle class, religious tendencies were still strong and dissatisfaction with radio and television were widespread.⁵⁷ For ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī, these findings were indicators of the revolution that took place only four years later in 1979. The book consists of the findings of two of the surveys. The first is a study of the role of the media in national and cultural development with a small statistical population mostly comprising of the educated elite and employees of the NIRT.⁵⁸ The second survey – which is of more interest for this paper – has a much larger statistical population designed to represent the national population. It was titled *Girāyishhā-yi farhangī va nigarishhā-yi ijtimā‘ī dar Īrān* (Cultural Tendencies and Social Attitudes in Iran) and was conducted as a pilot research in 23 towns and cities and 52 villages in different provinces.⁵⁹ According to the researchers’ introduction to the survey, the statistical population was chosen carefully to be representative of the adult (over fifteen years old) population of the whole of the country. They were chosen according to their residential location, gender, age, education, employment and income. Twenty-five experienced researchers and 300 interviewers were involved in the research. The survey was conducted simultaneously in every location and included 5,000 interviewees (case studies) of which 4,420 were

⁵⁵ Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12–13.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 63.

eventually confirmed and were included in the study. According to ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī, the survey’s documents such as the individual answers to the questionnaires and the coding method for the open-ended questions have been lost.⁶⁰ However, the questionnaire itself and the results of the survey have remained. The questionnaire included 126 questions with 107 of them being closed-ended and the other 19 being open-ended. Each questionnaire was filled with the help of an on-location interviewer and lasted for about an hour. Questions were designed to cover topics such as radio, television, cinema, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books, news sources, leisure time, religion, family, hopes and ideals, social relations and more. The findings of this research shed a light on a less explored aspect of the cultural habits of Iranians in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution.

According to the findings of the survey, by as late as 1974, only 7% of the population relied on newspapers and the press as their source of news. According to UNESCO, in 1976 the Adult literacy rate in Iran was 36.5%.⁶¹ This indicates that even two years after the survey was conducted, a large section of the population remained outside the readership of publications; however, the wide gap between 7% and 36.5% points to the fact that people were relying on other sources of news. This can be explained by the growing popularity of radio and television. According to the findings of the survey, radio had a much higher share than newspapers, at 53%, with television at 21%.⁶² So, while the readership of Persian language publications remained very low, the audience of the audio-visual means of communication were on the rise. This allowed for radio and television (and, on a smaller scale, cinema) to play an important role in spreading a single national language and thus contributing to the formation of Iranian national identity. However, as discussed previously, the road to popularity for these media was not an easy one. The difficulty was due to many factors including lack of infrastructure, high cost of individual devices, and religious opposition. Although the religious opposition was mainly towards cinema and television (due to their visual quality and “immoral” content), radio was also opposed by some (for example because it broadcast music, which was considered by some as anti-Islamic). An interesting account is by Muḥammad Javād Ṣarīf, Iran’s current minister of foreign affairs, born in 1960. In an interview with the daily newspaper *Īrān* on January 7th 2015, Ṣarīf recounted that while growing up not only did he not go to cinema until he was fifteen, he didn’t

⁶⁰ Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki šinīdih nashud*, 9.

⁶¹ “Literacy Rate, Adult Total (% of People Ages 15 and Above) – Iran, Islamic Rep (Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics),” The World Bank, last modified September 2020, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=IR-1W>.

⁶² Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki šinīdih nashud*, 143.

have access to either television or radio at home due to his family's religious beliefs. He mentioned that although his father owned a radio, he always kept it in a locked closet and only used it during the month of Ramadan to listen to the Morning Prayer.⁶³

According to Asadī and Tehrānīyān's research, by 1974, 77% of Iranian households had at least one radio,⁶⁴ while the percentage of households with televisions was 34%.⁶⁵ Among the people who didn't listen to radio, 21% stated that they didn't listen because they believed listening to radio (especially music) was sinful, while 46% said that they didn't have access to radio.⁶⁶ The study also shows that 85% of television owners watched TV on a daily basis,⁶⁷ while 11% of television owners didn't watch TV because in their view it was sinful.⁶⁸ The study also gives an interesting insight into people's habit of going to the cinema. The percentage of cinema goers was even lower at 27%,⁶⁹ with 23% of people refusing to go to the cinema because it was sinful.⁷⁰

The study clearly shows that while by 1974 a large portion of the population had access to audio-visual public media, a significant part of them refused to use these means of communication due to their religious beliefs. The 1979 Revolution, however, resulted in a major change in the attitude of this portion of the population towards television, radio and cinema.

On February 1st 1979, immediately after landing in Tehran upon his return from exile in Paris, Rūḥullāh Khumīnī travelled to Bihisht-i Zahrā cemetery to meet his followers, who had flocked to the streets to welcome him. In one of the most historic speeches in Iranian history, he expressed his opposition to the Shah and his reformed administration: "I will hit this government on the mouth".⁷¹ He then outlined the future that he envisioned for Iran: "With the backing of this nation, I appoint the government".⁷² A significant part of this speech was dedicated to the public media:

⁶³ Muḥammad Javād Ṣarīf, "Nāshinidihāyī az zindigī-yi Ṣarīf dar rūz-i tavalludash" (Unheard Stories from Ṣarīf's Life on His Birthday), accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.isna.ir/news/93101709584/>.

⁶⁴ Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Ṣidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 70.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁷¹ Rūḥullāh Khumīnī, "Ṣahīfih-yi Imām" (Scriptures of the Iman), vol. 6, 10–19, accessed July 25, 2018, <http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/Theme1/fa/pages/165.aspx?catid=207&id=51237&lang=fa>.

⁷² Ibid.

Since he was a servant [for the west], this man [the Shah] created centers of corruption. His television is a center of corruption. His radio is mostly corruption. [...] Our cinema is a center of corruption. We are not opposed to cinema; we are opposed to corruption. We are not opposed to radio; we are opposed to corruption. We are not opposed to television; we are opposed to something that is serving the aliens for holding back our youth and taking away our human resources. Did we ever oppose stages of modernity? [Rhetorical question implying that they are not against modernity] When symbols of modernity entered the East, especially Iran, from Europe, instead of being useful, they took us to savagery. Cinema is one of the symbols of modernity that should be in the service of the people, in the service of the education of the people. But you know that it ruined our youth. The same goes for the other symbols. That is why we are opposed to them. They betrayed our country in every sense of the word.⁷³

Soon after this speech, Khumiyīn's followers seized power. The new regime's attitude towards cinema, television and radio followed Khumiyīn's guidance and his belief that "in an Islamic country everything must be Islamic".⁷⁴ A period of 'cleansing' (*pāksāzi*) and 'purification' (*tasfiyih*) ensued. Many media professionals were prosecuted, banned, imprisoned and even executed. Many others fled the country along with a vast number of other Iranians who chose a life in exile.

The Islamization of the media had an inevitable consequence: it broke the taboo of modern audio-visual media for those sections of the society that due to religious reasons did not use them. The revolution ploughed the Iranian land to an extent that radio and television became an inseparable part of 'pious' households that previously refrained from allowing such symbols of 'corruption' to enter them. For them, these media were now channels through which they could hear the voice and see the image of their Imam. Cinema venues also became a hangout of Islamic revolutionaries. For instance, on its opening night, a cinema venue called *Shahr-i Qiyām* (The City of Uprising) showed a new 'Islamic' film titled *Sarbāz-i Islām* (The Soldier of Islam) in the holy city of Qom. As a result of this development, it can be argued that for the first time in history, the entirety of the Iranian population was open to the idea of using modern audio-visual media.

The Islamic Republic inherited the Pahlavi nation-state building program and continued with many aspects of it, most importantly the heavy incorporation of modern audio-visual media. The outburst of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–

⁷³ Khumiyīn, "Šahīfih-yi Imām".

⁷⁴ Rūhullāh Khumiyīn, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'ī-i a'zā-yi anjuman-i islāmī-yi dānishjūyān-i Īrānī dar Urūpā" (Speech for Members of the Islamic Association of Iranian Students in Europe), accessed November 26, 2018, <http://emam.com/posts/plain/2716>.

1988) was an important moment in the nationalist politics of the Islamic Republic and in the construction of Iranian national identity. Radio and television took the news of the warfronts to the remotest parts of the country and encouraged Iranians to sign up as volunteers in order to fight a common enemy. Cinema also gave birth to a new filmmaking movement officially titled *Sīnamā-yi difāʿ-i muqaddas* (Sacred Defense Cinema) which depicted and supported the war effort. The Persian language was at the heart of this campaign. In a country where just above half of the population spoke Persian as their mother tongue,⁷⁵ the audio-visual war propaganda was mainly in Persian. So, at the time when modern audio-visual media reached its most widespread state, its content was not only calling for national unity against a foreign enemy but also was contributing to the further spread of the Persian language and thus helped to create the ‘imagined community’ of Iranians. The Persian language, which was an important factor in the construction of the idea of Iran during the late 19th century and later, became a pillar of the national ideology of the Pahlavis and continued to occupy a significant position under the Islamic Republic. The extent to which the new regime valued the Persian language in its audio-visual productions is clear in the words of Murtizā Āvinī, director of arguably the most influential Iranian television war documentary series titled *Rivāyat-i fath* (Chronicle of Triumph, 1986–1988). In an interview published first in 1992 he goes as far as placing Persian above Arabic and defends it with a sense of Iranian exceptionalism:

Our language is the language that we arrived at in the 8th century [14th century CE] and this Persian language that has flourished in Islam is a language that in fact has taken a Shiʿi character and is much more beautiful than the current Arabic language. Of course, the language of the Quran is a divine language and something heavenly, but the language that we arrived at in the 8th century with Saʿdī and Ḥāfiz, is the most beautiful language existing on the planet earth.⁷⁶

Conclusion

In this paper I aimed to open a new chapter in the study of Iranian national identity. Although currently the dominant approach in the field is that Iranian national identity is a modern construct, the role of modern audio-visual media

⁷⁵ “Country Profile: Iran,” Library of Congress, Federal Research Divisions, last modified May 2008, accessed October 30, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Murtizā Āvinī, “Sīnamā, tiknūlūzhī va sākhṭār-i huviyati barā-yi insān-i nū” (Cinema, Technology, and Identity Structure for the New Man), in *Āyinih-yi jādū* (Magic Mirror), ed. by Ūmid Rūhānī, vol. 3 (Tehran: Vāḥih, 2015), 144.

in this construction is seldom considered. I based my argument on a number of scholarly works in both Persian and English in the field of Iranian Studies as well as Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities', all belonging to the modernization approach towards the study of 'nations' and 'national identities'. While acknowledging the role of late 19th century Persian publications in the crafting of the idea of Iran and construction of Iranian national identity, I tried to focus on the role of the audio-visual media in this construction. In this attempt I benefitted from works of several scholars of Film Studies and Iranian Studies as well as historical resources such as speeches, interviews and autobiographies. An important argument of this paper regarding the further popularization of modern audio-visual media as a result of the 1979 Revolution became possible after a close study of a recently published book containing the findings of a survey conducted in 1974.⁷⁷ The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Islamization of the audio-visual media made it possible for these media to find their way even into homes of the most pious members of the society. In a society with low literacy rates, the widespread use of audio-visual media, especially during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, helped to create a sense of national identity.

These media continue to play an important role in the nationalist politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in creating a sense of national unity among their domestic audience. A careful study of the current trends of politics in Iran, especially considering the state's involvement in regional wars, should take into account the nation-state building project that the Islamic Republic inherited from the Pahlavi dynasty and the essential role of modern audio-visual media in these programs.

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